



Take on Board

Transcript – Lisa Annese

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast I'm speaking to Lisa Annese about a recent report by the Diversity Council of Australia called "class at work". First, let me tell you about Lisa. Lisa is on the board of Amnesty International Australia and is the chief executive officer of Diversity Council of Australia. In this role, she leads debate on diversity and inclusion in the public arena, and she appears regularly on the ABCs the drum and in the wider Australian media. Under her leadership, DCA delivers innovative diversity practice resources for Australian businesses, and supports them in improving their inclusion capability. In 2018, Lisa was named one of AFR's 100 women of influence. In 2019, as I mentioned earlier, she was elected to the Amnesty International Australia board. And she's also executive producer of DCA's podcast, "The art of inclusion", so you're well versed in the way this podcast world works. Lisa's had a long career in the diversity and inclusion space across the corporate government and not for profit sector, which is exactly why I thought she'd be a fabulous guest on Take on Board today. So welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Lisa.

Lisa Annese 1:10

Thanks, Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:11

So Lisa, before we dive into our discussion today, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me what was the young Lisa like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the sort of role you're in today?

Lisa Annese 1:25

Look, I had no idea. I mean, the careers like this didn't exist when I was little. I was always a really opinionated child. And I was always very concerned with things being fair. And I was very clued into things when they weren't fair. So I had a heightened radar for fairness. I mean, I think I always identified as a feminist even before I had a word for it. And so I always had a proclivity towards social justice issues. But you know, I studied finance at university, I started off in banking, I had no idea you could do this as a profession, that it just wasn't an option. It became an option when I was a graduate and working in a big institutional bank and workplaces were just starting to consider that diversity might be a thing that they should pay attention to. And in those days, it was just gender diversity. Workplaces were focused on, I say focused, they there were a few people who thought it

was important to have a conversation about women in leadership took a long time for that conversation to become mainstream. And for it to be considered your normal practice to be interested in equal opportunity and in fair representation. And that's just the agenda, all of the other dimensions of diversity that I concern myself with Now, in addition to gender, they all came later, and a lot of them are still, you know, really just on the sidelines, most workplaces don't consider them. And so I would definitely say that it now is a you know, you can you could potentially see yourself as having a professional career in this space.

Helga Svendsen 3:24

I mean, it's so great that things have advanced in that way, I guess, because you're right, it used to just inverted commas be about women. And whilst I don't want that to be lost in the broader diversity discussion, it is fantastic that we do look at it in through a much broader lens now, and also nice to hear that you're a young feminist as well. You don't often hear that about young girls and it should be more of it. My first board was the YWCA in Victoria are proudly feminist organization. And it continues fantastic work in in supporting the next generation of young feminists. So it's always good to hear.

Lisa Annese 3:58

Well, so successful has been the backlash against feminism that it made a generation of young women not want to identify that way because it was seen as even though feminism is absolutely about the dignity of all humans. It was absolutely as backlash, often does it was characterized as being anti male being anti feminine. And it because young girls are groomed pretty much to never want to be objectionable and to always be agreeable, especially to the opposite sex, then that was seen as not being something you should aspire to. I think that's still, I mean, maybe less so now. It's still there, though. I mean, I have three daughters. It's still there.

Helga Svendsen 4:43

Do they call themselves feminists?

Lisa Annese 4:45

Yeah, they do. And they all have T shirts say feminist because I bought them for

Helga Svendsen 4:51

I love those teachers. This is what a feminist looks like. Yeah.

Lisa Annese 4:54

So you know, they absolutely are and you know, even if they wouldn't use the word, I hear it in what they say. I hear the objection they take to being characterized certain ways, what they, how they reflect on social media. They may not use the word but they are, although they probably do, but they are absolutely feminist.

Helga Svendsen 5:14

Yeah, yes. Well, perhaps that's no surprise. So, you know, speaking, diversity and inclusion, and all the wonderful things that DCA does work in, you've just released a report recently called class at work, does social class make a difference in the land of the fair go? So maybe let's start with that. Does social class make a difference in the land of the fair go?

Lisa Annese 5:43

Absolutely, it does. And we always knew it did. But no one had ever measured it, um, in terms of, you know, what it meant in a workplace context. And it's very, it's very, very, very present. We measured nine separate dimensions of diversity. And we do this every two years. And what we were able to determine was that your socioeconomic status and class more than any other part of your identity, including your gender, your race, whether or not you have a disability, whether you're LGBTQ Plus, you know, whether or not you're indigenous, your socio economic status is the most significant factor in determining your inclusion experience or your exclusion experience in a workplace and surprised me.

Helga Svendsen 6:37

Yeah, it surprised me too, that there it was more of a factor than any of the others. And, of course, there will be intersectionality, between some of those factors as well. It certainly interested me that that was the number one factor in terms of inclusion or exclusion.

Lisa Annese 6:54

And it's not to say the other factors aren't really significant. I mean, they are really some factors are very, very significant. But this was the most significant. And I think that that's really interesting, because the narrative about Australia, is that it's the land of the fair go. Our Prime Minister famously said, once, "if you have a go, you'll get a go". And what our research shows, that actually isn't necessarily true that getting a go, happens more easily for some people than for others, depending on their social class.

Helga Svendsen 7:29

And so can you take us through the key findings of the report,

Lisa Annese 7:32

The findings of the report come out of a biannual survey that we do across the labor market, called inclusion network, it's an index we run where we're able to measure inclusion in a workplace context. And what we found was that your social class, which includes your socio economic status, so we measured it by looking at your wealth, but also your income, they can be separate things. We looked at education, including what school, university you may have gone to, or whether you went to school, to university, but they also include things like your social network and contacts. And so it's quite a big thing. Some bits about someone's class change over time, like your profession could change, your income could change, other things don't change, primarily the family with which you were born into, and the the wealth of that family and the school you went to, for example, but we know that, that that is also significant. So what we're able to do was understand what this what the impact of that was, when you entered the workplace, did it mean you had access to opportunity? Did it mean you worked in a respectful workplace? Did you receive respect or were you more likely to be harassed and bullied or discriminated against? Were you more likely to be in a workplace where there was human connection, and where you had opportunities for progress or where you were rewarded fairly for the work that you did, and they are the measures of inclusion. So our index is able to understand what inclusion looks like a lot of people focus on inclusion as though it's a touchy feely thing. So it's all about belonging. And we actually measure it scientifically, the belonging aspect of inclusion is a very small part of it, it's actually about you can be in a workplace where you're mates with everyone, they feel like you belong, but if you miss out on opportunities, you're not paid fairly, then you're not in an inclusive workplace. So we're able to look at it pretty objectively. And we're able to say that if you were from what we would call a lower class, or in old language, a working class, compared to middle and upper classes, you're much less likely to have those opportunities, and you're much more likely to experience exclusion in a workplace and that can have manifold effect on individuals. So not just their economic attainment and therefore having a prosperous kind of life. But it also can take its toll in other way. So being in an unsafe work environment, like a psychologically unsafe work environment, because you're, you experienced discrimination is actually really bad for someone's well being, for example. So it has a lot of had a lot of it was quite a big impact on people, depending on their social class. All right.

Helga Svendsen 10:25

So there's a couple of things I want to pick up on there. So firstly, I think you said bi annual, and presumably hadn't looked at class as one of the factors previously. So again, presumably, somebody's curiosity was piqued. Oh, I wonder if and therefore included a question about this to see what what came out? Is that how it came about?

Lisa Annese 10:46

My curiosity? Yeah,

Helga Svendsen 10:47

There you go.

Lisa Annese 10:48

Because I came from a working class background. And I know it's true. And I also because I've, we've done research on who dominates boardrooms and who's in the C suite across Australia, we hear people talk about the concept of privilege without measuring it. But we know it's true. There was a really interesting study that was done by an academic at the University of Queensland Dr. Terrence Fitzsimons where it was a while ago now. But it really resonated with me. And it was he had a look at what unites the CEOs of Australia's biggest organizations. And what he found was apart from mainly being male, at the time, there were only seven female CEOs out of the top 200 listed companies in Australia. But of the 193, I mean, you have to say that number out, we'll have the 193 men who are running Australia's top companies, he found that they were disproportionately the same. So they were white, Anglo Celtic, they came from traditional families, they were probably the youngest in the family. They were also private school educated, and they probably played rugby. And of all the seven women who were the CEOs, they were public school educated, though the oldest in their families. And they actually existed in a family where there was it was, there was something non traditional that happened. So there was an absence, so a divorce or death of a parent that sort of catapulted them into sort of a leadership position, and probably created the climate for them to become much more resilient. So these women had to overcome a lot of hurdles. Because it's not just about merit. Obviously, we know merit is a myth, even though people love to say that merit is a real thing. And that study just stuck with me. And I just thought that is just so interesting. And I've heard other people. And I know workplaces talk a lot about privilege, but they don't name it. And I wanted to name it, and I wanted to measure it, because that's what we do we measure things.

Helga Svendsen 12:55

And it's actually not enough. This is the right word, but I'll say it this way anyway. You know, class call it class rather than privilege. I have heard of different privilege indexes and how they relate. But it all comes back to class, as you say. So it's, you know, naming it in that way as well is refreshing.

Lisa Annese 13:14

Well, yeah, because privilege implies I don't know what it implies. I mean, class gives you privilege. And, and it's not to say that everyone who attends a private school, that their path path is preordained. But I can tell you, unless you believe that talent, and intelligence and skill resides only within the precious brains and bodies of people who attend elite institutions, then you've got to reckon that this something pretty markedly strange with the system. And what that means for workplaces is that they are missing out on talent. It also means that organizations are not able to draw from the largest possible school of available talent. And that doesn't make Australia very competitive. We know from our index again, but again, this is something which is supported by lots of research that effective organizations or organizations with diverse thinking with is a lack of homogenous identity where more heterogeneity will lead to innovation. It leads to a reduction in risk. All those things boards, no good governance comes from this. So it's really important to try and follow the path back to where does this all begin?

Helga Svendsen 14:34

So for boards then, I mean, I think some boards no hard love to think that all boards know that diversity is better in the boardroom. I'm not sure that they do all know that but it is certainly not a fringe conversation these days about diversity in the boardroom.

Lisa Annese 14:49

It's not a fringe conversation. I think the focus for boards has been on women getting women into boards, which is obvious because women are not a minority group. You know, women has have to be the starting point where half the population, but I'd like to see the compensation go further because what we also know about women who get appointed to boardrooms is that they tend to be one type of woman, not to say that they're not deserving. But we did a study a couple of years ago called "cracking the glass cultural ceiling". And what we're able to find is that affirmative action programs in Australia have benefited Anglo Celtic, able bodied, cisgendered women. So if you have a culturally diverse identity, if you have disability, if you, you know, LGBTQ, you will not benefit from the progressive work that's being done, you know, within organizations to get women properly represented in leadership. So it's very important that we look at women and men not as monoliths, but as groups of classes of humans, where there's also a lot of diversity

Helga Svendsen 16:05

Take on Board listeners will have heard me say this, I think that I always like to think about it in terms of gender equality, and diversity. Because, you know, if we replace all the old white men on boards with old white women, we haven't won, that's not diversity, it might be equality, but we need both equality and diversity, to really get that power.

Lisa Annese 16:23

And I mean, it's obviously it's having all women who are a one group is better than having none, because at least women's issues are on the agenda. And at least you won't have horrendous decisions, like the ones made by Apple in 2015, when they launched their watch, and they forgot, and they they had, and they marketed their watch as being something that will enable people to monitor all their, their health and well being data. And they had no women on the design team. And so of course, there was nothing that enabled people to track their menstrual cycle or they're pregnant. I mean, yeah, half the population can't track their health data without considering that such a freakin obvious thing to consider. And yet, but you need the women, you need women there. So, you know, having 50% representation of women should have should be our goal. But let's have a conversation about who those women are. But we can't have it without asking who the men are either. I mean, I get really cross when people always make a fuss about all the women that are the same. What about the men? So, you know, let's start with them, because they dominate most of the positions of power at the moment.

Helga Svendsen 17:34

Yeah, that's true. And it's not, oh, we need a new board member. So it needs to be a woman from regional Australia, who's, you know, also got a disability? And, and, and, and, and it's like, no, I don't need to tick all the boxes, the boxes need to be ticked by the board collectively, not by that one person.

Lisa Annese 17:51

Exactly. By the board collectively. Because if you had racial diversity across the board, diversity and indigenous representation across the board, collectively, then people you know, would be, there'd be fewer articles written in the Fin Review about the golden skirts club?

Helga Svendsen 18:10

Yes.

So thinking about boards, and this report class at work, people who are of working class feel more excluded, less included, yet we know that inclusive workplaces are those that are more effective and productive and happy. And all of those good things that boards are on the lookout for, what's your advice to boards? What should they be looking for, in? I guess, making the most of the data from this report? What What should they be doing?

Lisa Annese 18:39

I think they should be asking questions of their executive leadership around how are they going to represent the market, the talent, the opportunity, in all of its diversity and classes, one of those things that you need to consider, you know, if you're recruiting only from a narrowed talent pool and say, for example, because you want to is very hard to say it's a highly sought after position. And so you can't positions based on sandstone universities, you know, that's not going to get you an effective representation of people. So asking those questions not to think that this is something else to consider in the suite of things that make makeup people. The other thing I think that's really important about this research is that what it revealed to us is that the backlash against diversity and inclusion can also be explained through class. Our research found that men from higher classes were really supportive of diversity and inclusion, probably because their position is guaranteed. I mean that they don't feel like they're under threat. But the men from lower classes were much less likely to support diversity and inclusion. as something that workplaces should be focused on. Whereas for women, it didn't matter what classroom we're from women were uniformly supportive regardless of their class, which probably shows that most women are familiar with what needs to happen with respect to effective equity practices in a workplace, and they understand what inequity looks like, because most women do not work on boards, most women are not in C suites. Most people are not, that's not the reality for most people. And the other thing our research showed was that men from law classes were also less likely to work in organizations that were active in diversity and inclusion. And so therefore, they're likely likely to understand why this might be a good thing. And I think that that's important in and of itself to know. But also, there's a strategic bit of information there. Because if you want to engage people and bring them along the journey with you, you need to understand the impact class has on your views towards What's this. I think that that's quite astute to understand, politically, because I think it goes some way to explain things like why people vote one nation, or why people vote sometimes against their own interests, because they see other things as being elitist, or socially progressive as being something that doesn't benefit them. And that's important to understand. It's not true. But it's important to understand the fee.

Helga Svendsen 21:32

Absolutely. And I don't always get the recordings of these, but we're recording this in the 11th of November today. And looking at the outcomes of the American election, I think there is lots to reflect on there about how people feel excluded, and what that means for them as well.

Lisa Annese 21:48

So it's something interesting about the American elections are it that people are more likely to assume that people who voted democrat earn over a certain percentage, a year so there are more people make this assumption, if you're Democrat, you're more likely to earn 250,000 American dollars a year more. But that there was a small proportion of Republicans who didn't actually that wasn't true, that there were just as many elites in the Republican Party's in the Democratic Party, but for some reason, because of the more socially progressive agenda, that has been correlated with

elitism. And yet you look at the voter turnout for who voted for Joe Biden. And I mean, apart from it being overwhelmingly female, but African American, and I think it's, it's just important to try and work out. The perception is not necessarily the truth, and we need to interrogate that.

Helga Svendsen 22:41

I'm loving your what's the word, your alliance, that's not quite the right word. But your emphasis on data, data and evidence, it's so important to just look at what there isn't even this report, as I say, came from an inkling that you had, oh, I wonder how class interacts? Let's add it to the data set. So we can actually find out rather than just, oh, I've got this inkling, or I've got this feeling, or perhaps it's like this or anecdotal, I knew this would happen. We have way too much to talk about in the time, what are the key points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Lisa Annese 23:13

Well, I think depending on who you are, I think if you're a leader or on a board, I think you should consider that this matters. And it's I'm very against, not on against, but the idea that individuals can change a system, if they have no power is problematic. I really get cross when people for example, tell women, that if you want to be a leader, you just need to get networked. And you just need to get a mentor without actually thinking the system might be rigged against them. And then all the mentoring in the world won't get them there. What you actually need is privilege. And what you actually need is to have gone to the right school, the right University, come from the right family have the right networks. Now, given we can't go and reprogram our histories, it's important then to try and take a wide view when it comes to providing opportunities for people when it comes to actually genuinely finding talent and merit. Let's try and look in places that we wouldn't normally look.

Helga Svendsen 24:17

I often ask people for a resource that might be handy for the Take on Board community, which is exactly where I was going to say the DCA website has some incredible information. And I'll make sure I put a link to this report and the DCA's website overall in the show notes for today's episode, but is there any other resource that you might like to share with the take on board community?

Lisa Annese 24:38

So I do go to our website, what they'll find there is that we conduct evidence based research across all diversity, dimensions, including gender, culture, age, disability, etc. Next week, we're about to release a piece of work on the experience of having an indigenous identity in the Australian workplace. context. And that's going to be pretty compelling some of the, what we've discovered in

that, especially as it relates to the global movement we've seen this year and Black Lives Matter and racism, systemic racism. So if you're interested in things to do with diversity and help plays out in a workplace context, then our website is full of resources for you.

Helga Svendsen 25:24

Fantastic. I'll keep an eye on for reports and come back to you and some of those come up, and we'd love to have you back on the show at some stage in the future. The pleasure, thank you so much for being here today and for sharing some of your experience and your thoughts and your wisdom around this today. It was fantastic to have you here.

Lisa Annese 25:41

Thank you so much.